Unreeling the Past of the Motion Picture

By Harriette Underhill

A picture taken when movies had just been launched.
Top row—George Loane Tucker, Mrs. Pickford, William Robert Daly, Antonio Gaudio. Second row—William Shay, Mrs. David Miles (Anita Hendry). J. Frank McDonald, Hayward Mack, Jack Harvey. Third row—Tom Wise, Owen Moore, Mary Pickford, King Baggot, Joe Smiley. Bottom row—Isabel Rae, Jack Pickford, Lottie Pickford.

"YOU know everything about pictures, don't you?" said the Sunday editor; and without waiting for us to say "Of course," he went on: "Why don't you write a story about the origin of the motion picture, and be sure to find out what was the very first picture ever shown!"

There is something very flattering about a proposal of this kind. It makes one feel so much more important than if one goes blushingly up to the editor and offers to put one's brilliant ideas into concrete form.

Now, our editor makes you feel that you have been chosen because of your peculiar talents in that particular field, and it sounded so simple! All you had to do was to go to some one—any one in the business—ask him the name of the first motion picture, what year it was shown and by whom, how long it ran, what was the next one, and so on down.

Or, if you didn't want to take that trouble, you could sit comfortably in the library and read the encyclopedia and then add a few observations of your own.

Somehow, it didn't happen like that. We received our assignment one week ago, and ever since that we have been seeking, day and night, information anent the first motion picture. Of course, we spent considerable time trying to get information over the telephone when we might have saved time by calling at the offices in person.

A False Start

Right at first, not more than two or three days after we started out, we thought we had it trapped. Several people told us that "Miss Jerry" was the first motion picture, made in 1894 by Alexander Black. We had almost decided to let "Miss Jerry" have it, when we found out that "Miss Jerry" didn't move at all. She stood still, while Alexander Black read about her to the audience. At different stages of the story the slides were changed. That was all. "Miss Jerry" was what was known as a picture play. She was received in the best society and furnished entertainment at Sunday schools and Chautauquas, but, even while her antecedents were perhaps more aristocratic than those of the cinema, she was not a motion picture—never could she be called a "movie."

Hidden away in some encyclopedia somewhere there may be the information which we sought; but we offer a year's subscription to our favorite morning newspaper to any one who can find it. So we haven't much fear of contradiction when we state boldly that "The Ocean Wave" was the first picture shown—in 1895—and that the second was "The May Irwin Kiss."

Moe Streimer assured us that these two pictures were not shown by the same process that he used when he projected some fight pictures twenty-five years ago, in which Ernest Roeber and Gus Muldoon were seen. He intimated that the fight pictures were much nicer; but it all depends, probably, on which form of entertainment you prefer.

Now, of course, one hundred "Constant Readers" will write in and tell us that we are all wrong, but that's our story and we're going to stick to it. We gave up liberty and the pursuit of happiness for one week to unearth that information, and we who shall not lightly relinquish it.

Anyway, we believe it is true because Sam Spedon gave it to us. And who is Sam Spedon? That's what we asked a week ago, but not now.

During these last busy days we have sought James Noulty, of the Famous Players; Carl Laemmle, of the Universal; Albert Smith, of the Vitagraph; George Blaisdell, of the "Moving Picture World"; Herbert Miles, of Miles Brothers, and a few others, and to each one we have told our little story, ending up with "Now, what was the very first picture shown?"

Here each one would stop and think and then he would say, "By Jove, I don't know! Why don't you see Sam Spedon?" And some would add "or Albert Capellani? If it was a French picture he would know all about it."

Now, Sam Spedon was only a name to us. To be sure, he was rapidly becoming familiar, but Albert Capellani we had met once, and we remembered that he had nice auburn whiskers and a pleasant smile. So to Albert Capellani we went.

Mr. Capellani is almost certain that the first motion pictures were made in France, though he himself has been making pictures only about sixteen years: He said:

"The first picture that I can remember was made by Lumière. It showed a boy walking in the garden and putting his foot on a hose. The gardener wondered why the water had stopped running and stooped down to look in the hose, when the boy took his foot off the hose. This was hailed as a great achievement."

Later, when we talked to Herbert Miles, he told us that his Lumière picture was the first one he ever had seen, too. It was shown at Keith's Theater in Union Square However, we are still backing "The May Irwin Kiss."

Mr. Capellani told us that the early pictures were made in a cellar of the Grand Cafe, Paris. In America, here, we had higher aspirations, for Sam Spedon told us that our early pictures were made on the roof of the Morton Building at 116 Nassau Street.

Faster the Better

"In those early days people were satisfied," he said "if they saw things move, the faster the better. We never had any stories, nor plots. We would gather at the studio, two or three of us, and would say 'well, we have to make a picture to-day.' And then we would get a table and a couple of kitchen chairs and a dog, if possible, and start in to be funny.

"Finally the time came when I made the first two-reel picture. It was called 'L'Assommoir' at that time. I remember that I considered America very far behind in the picture game, but one day a picture came from America called 'The Haunted House.' How it was made no one could understand, for the objects moved of their own accord. Pathé offered prizes to any one who could solve the mystery, but we never did learn.

"However, at that time I had an idea of my own. I found that by moving the objects a little at a time and taking hundreds of pictures of them, and then running them off fast, it appeared as though the objects were moving of their own volition.

"Then we began to make comedies. Max Linder was the first one to be successful in comedies; the first star in France. Max Linder's first picture was called 'The Skaters' First Day at the Rink,' and the title was nearly as long as the picture itself. Pathe saw at once what could be done with pictures. It was a question of technicality to put more film into the camera and to pass it out again. Edison's camera was the first to do this correctly."

"Who invented motion pictures?" he was asked, and answered: "I doubt if any one knows. The idea is so old. At first they had a gyroscope like a round box. We used to put figures in it and turn it around and they appeared to be moving. The Lumière brothers were the first to put it in shape to commercialize it, I am nearly sure.

"The first Pathe pictures, and the most interesting to my mind, were the chase pictures—pursuit pictures we call them. Of course, they had no title—they needed none—and the real picture will come when we are able again to make pictures without titles."

Here we do not agree with Mr. Capellani at all. We love brilliant lines, whether they are spoken on the stage or flashed to us on the silver sheet.

"I still have the first picture I ever made. It was called 'When the Cat Is Out the Mice Will Dance.' First, it showed Mr. and Mrs. Blank going away to the opera; then all the servants got out the wine and danced until the master and mistress came home and found them. This ran for sixty feet."

So, after listening to all Mr. Capellani had to tell, we went home, determined to put on record the fact that Lumière had made the first picture and had called it "Johnny Plays a Trick on the Gardener," for although the subject did not exactly appeal to our romantic nature, still it seemed to be the best we could do Neither could we determine the exact date, so we decided to be mysterious and let its origin be set down with artistic vagueness, rather than bold accuracy.

And then the next morning the telephone rang and a crisp voice said: "This is Sam Spedon. I heard that you were looking for data for a story about the origin of the motion picture, and there is nothing I like better than talking about it. If you will come to my office I shall be delighted to tell you everything you want to know."

"Do you," we asked tremulously, "do you know what was the first picture ever shown?"

"Yes, I've got it all down here. When will you be over?"

"Right away," we answered, and rushed out and grabbed one of those nice tin taxis that take you ten feet for 10 cents, and flew over to 516 Fifth Avenue as fast as the traffic and the traffic cops would allow.

Mrs. Fiske in an early Famous Players production, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles"

An Important Interview

Sam Spedon is deliberate. He smiled genially and acted as though it was an everyday occurrence for a young woman in an imported hat, (we insist on the hat, because it cost us all that we are going to get for this story) to invade his premises and demand the name of the first motion picture ever made.

Of course he could not know or appreciate our anxiety. He seated himself in a swivel chair opposite our uncomfortable one, and placing the tips of his fingers together he said:

"In 1877 Muybridge made the first motion pictures."

"In 1877!" we exclaimed. "Why, there weren't any motion pictures then. There couldn't have been!"

"Not motion pictures as we know them, but they did have a certain kind of action. Muybridge took horses running by placing twenty-four cameras in a row and snapping them on each camera as they passed. When these pictures were passed through a slide, they appeared to be moving."

"But this picture didn't have any name, did it?" we asked.

"No, of course not; it was only to show the action of animals. And ten years later a man named Le Prince did the same thing, only he took sixteen pictures on one negative and, showed them in a camera with sixteen lenses. They, too, appeared to be moving. There was at that time also a zoetrope, which was only a toy, but it had pictures inside which moved when you turned it around. It was the same principle as the present day motion picture, but no one had been able to make a camera to successfully project the pictures on the screen until Edison did it.

"I think Pathé perfected one about the same time, and then every one had ideas on the subject and every one jumped in and made cameras, with the result that there were nothing but lawsuits for the next few years, while the motion picture industry was at a standstill. Finally, they compromised by allowing each claimant to use all of the good points in the other's invention, and the motion picture industry began to move again.

"In 1893 or 1894 Alexander Black showed 'Miss Jerry' and 'Capital Courtship,' and called them moving pictures; only they didn't move very fast. Charles K. Harris did the same thing in his illustrated songs, and he claims that it was 'Just Break the News to Mother' that suggested the idea of having stories told on the screen."

"But these were not real motion pictures. You do know the name of the first picture, don't you?" we asked, feverishly.

Mr. Spedon considered. "Yes," he said, slowly, "I think I do. It was called 'The Ocean Wave.' 'The May Irwin Kiss' was shown about the same time. They ran about fifty feet. Another old one I remember at this time was called 'The History of a Sandwich.'

The First Close-up

"In 1896 Joseph Jefferson did 'Rip Van Winkle' before a Biograph camera. Here he appeared in one close-up, surely the first on record. And Marshall P. Wilder and Anna Held used to make pictures of this sort, too. No scenarios were required and no titles were used. The pictures were too short for that. The fact that they moved at all was sufficient. It was like the dog walking on his hind legs. People marvel, not because he can do it so well, but because he can do it at all.

"And then one day we received a scenario; it was the first one ever written by an outsider. I have it here."

"Oh, do let us have it," we begged. "It will be such a novelty!" for we had visions of an imposing looking manuscript, yellow with age.

Instead, Mr. Spedon took out a letter. Here it is: "Dear Sir: Why don't you make a picture about a bad little boy, who does things to all the neighbors, so they come and complain to his father and make him promise to spank him. The boy had a stick of dynamite in his pocket and when the father spanked him the dynamite exploded and all the people were blown to atoms. Hope you can use this."

"The author of that got $3 for his 'scenario.' We did use it."

We wish it were as simple as that now. We might write one.

When we talked to Mr. Naulty, of the Famous Players, he told us a great many things that Sam Spedon verified later. Mr. Naulty was one of the people who had suggested Mr. Spedon in the first place.

"I believe that 'The May Irwin Kiss' was the first picture, anyway it was the first one I ever saw, and it set a style in motion pictures. Now no photodrama is complete without one. But for some reason people seemed to prefer 'The Great Train Robbery.' There were more prints made of this than any other picture ever sold. And I helped to make it. It was great sport. Another popular picture was 'The Life of a Fireman.' I remember how crude this was, and yet how splendid we all thought it.

"One scene showed the firemen awakened by the bell, jumping into their clothes and sliding down the pole. The next day we went back to finish taking the picture and the firemen were mostly away. So we called on the clerks in the office and pressed them into service. They had no suits, so they appeared manning the trucks in their shirt-sleeves, or any way they happened to be. And when the picture was run off it looked as though the firemen had changed their costumes between the time they slid down the pole and the time they were seen leaping on the trucks, but no one minded in the least. They moved, and moved fast—that was enough.

"After this the pictures began to get better. There was 'The Moonshiners' and 'The Little Lost Child' and 'Melia's Trip to the Moon,' and 'Stolen by the Gypsies.'"

"And didn't any of these pictures have titles?" we asked, for we wished to know about the evolution of the title quite as much as about the evolution of the picture.

"Very few," answered Mr. Naulty, "and they were never con-

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